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Forgotten feminists: The Federation of British Professional and Business Women, 1933-1969.

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Forgotten feminists: The Federation of British Professional and Business Women, 1933-1969.

Abstract

Using archive documents of the British Federation of Business and Professional Women (BFBPW) this paper explores the role of this early business organisation in campaigning for feminist issues in the post-war period. It argues that the BFBPW is indicative of the complexities of the women's movement in the post-suffrage era when it fragmented into interconnecting campaigning organisations around a multitude of women's issues. The paper suggests that businesswomen in this period acted in ways that anticipated modern 'femocratic' practice in the way they sought to use business networks to gain access to parliamentary policy networks.

Key words. Business and professional women post-war feminism networks lobbying

Forgotten feminists: The Federation of British Professional and Business Women, 1933-1969.

Introduction

In 2004, Demos – the ‘independent think tank’ – published a report on women’s networking in business¹. It lauded the creation of women’s peer group networks as a way of harnessing the talents of women in organisations and as a diversity tool. By using networks women would be able to counter the ‘old boys network’ that worked to promote the interests of men and maintained the status quo with respect to gender within organisations. Women’s business networks, it claims, are a form of organising “uniquely suited to the gender politics of our time.”² Instead of pursuing a separatist agenda they concentrate on “creating a culture of high aspiration in which women’s success is the norm, and by providing opportunities for members to increase their visibility and put themselves forward for new leadership roles,”³

But the Demos report not only constructs a version of reality where contemporary women’s business is concerned but it also reconstructs, in its introduction, a sanitised historical narrative of women’s business networks.

“...the Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1970s deployed imaginative and eye-catching techniques of direct action and created a new political language in which to articulate their demands for a fairer, more gender-equal society. Yet while these activists might have shouted the loudest, they have been outlived and superseded by an altogether less vocal, yet numerically

significant area of organising among women, initiated by Beatrice Gordon Holmes and her ilk ... It wasn't, however, until the 1970s and the advent of second-wave feminist activity that organising among professional women took on a lighter, more dynamic structure, and the 'new girl network' was born"⁴.

The aim of this paper is to write the 'forgotten feminists' (Beatrice Gordon Holmes 'and her ilk') of managerial and professional status – the women who campaigned for equal rights, compensation and pay for women via the British Federation of Business and Professional Women (hereafter BFBPW) – back into the story of women's business organisations. It is also to make problematic the claim of such organisations such as CSR Chicks, Lloyds TSB Women's Network, Busygirls, Hightech-Women, DigitalEve, Citiwomen (Citigroup) or Thinkingwomen to *this* specific feminist lineage.

The BFBPW was an umbrella organisation that represented a number of women's professional and industry-specific groups such as The Electrical Association for Women and the National Association of Women Civil Servants. The women who were active in the BFBPW and in their member organisations were extremely vocal, concerned with building organisational structures to facilitate their campaigning and achieved reforms for working women decades before the advent of the 'new girl network'. Contemporary women's business organisations might be about exchanging business cards and creating an 'Old Girl's Network' but in the 1930s-1950s organisations such as the BFBPW represented a form of feminist activism that deserves to be considered as historically important.

The paper focuses on three particular time periods in the history of the BFBPW. The first period covers the formative years 1933-1935 when the BFBPW fought to be a politically active organisation rather than a social one for women, the second period is circa 1951-1953 when the Federation was in its organisational adulthood and the third and final period is the ‘crisis year’ of 1959, when it was first suggested that the Federation should dissolve. As such the structure of the paper is as follows; after setting the formation of the BFBPW in a feminist political context the next three sections focus on the three historical periods as outlined above. I conclude by questioning the use of organisations such as the BFBPW as a convenient matrilineal point of reference for modern businesswomen’s networks.

Living in the shadows of suffrage: the women’s movement in the 1930s

The period of time that encompasses the granting of suffrage in 1928 and the rise of the Women’s Liberation Movement at the end of the 1960s has been a difficult one for commentators on feminism to come to terms with. David Doughan has acknowledged the overall trend towards seeing it as a period untouched by the women’s movement, a time of retreat into domesticity, by calling it “this apparently grey and amorphous half-century of feminism.”⁵ His careful rebuttal of Sheila Rowbotham’s account of feminism in the 1930s⁶ and beyond (respectful in tone but rejecting her criticism of feminists of the time) is an example of the re-evaluation that has taken place since the 1970s of this period of feminist activity. The Women’s Liberation Movement itself, in its concern to collect and protect its own history, emphasised its discontinuities with previous feminist campaigning and chose to ignore those connected with equal pay, legal reform and anti-discrimination

legislation⁷ thus helping to erase our sense of connection to these earlier campaigners. But perhaps, being ‘post-liberation’ in the same way as feminists in the middle years of the last century found themselves ‘post-suffrage’, we are now ready to be more generous in our interpretation as well as curious about our similarities.

Many feminists who came to campaigning after the suffrage campaigns looked back on the previous generation with envy. Suffrage, as Doughan points out, was an extremely colourful and vibrant cause to be a part of – especially when it entered its later, militant phase. It was an easily understood principle for which to campaign and there was an air of excitement about it with its stirring rhetoric, glamorous processions and colourful banners. When the campaign achieved its objective the excitement, the comradeship and the romanticism died away.

“The aim of the suffrage movement has been single and simple, but what lay before feminists from the 1920s on was a much more complex, much trickier problem of dealing with legislation in a large number of highly specific and often ferociously complicated cases – boring, thankless, nit-picking work for the most part, entrusted to highly dedicated elite cadres”⁸.

In some cases the boring and nitpicking work was done by organisations that could claim direct descent from the Women’s Social and Political Union or the National Union of Suffrage Societies. But the women’s movement was broader than that and included a number of surprising organisations that undertook the ‘necessary drudgery’⁹ of lobbying in support of women’s issues. It included the Women’s Institute (itself founded by an active suffrage supporter Lady Denman), National

Union of Townswomen's Guilds (co-founded by Eva Hubback, parliamentary secretary of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) as a subsidiary of that organisation), the National Council of Women, the YWCA, the Mother's Union and the Catholic Women's League. All worked, in various ways, for the improvement of women's social and economic position¹⁰ in the post-suffrage era. Whilst, for many organisations, the 1930s represented 'business as usual' in respect of campaigning some organisations were undergoing a period of retreat and reverses. For example, despite hitting its peak membership figures in 1938, the militant Women's Co-operative Guild was starting to withdraw from campaigning about issues of sexual inequality in the home.¹¹ But there were also organisations that were being formed at this time by the very generation that Rowbotham argued were hostile to feminism¹². Amongst these were the British Federation of Business and Professional Women who, rather than representing an organisation that was retreating from women's issues took an apolitical cultural and social organisation and used their position to lobby government.

The Struggle To Achieve A Political Voice. 1933-1935

Before the BFBPW came into existence in 1935, business and professional women in the UK were represented as a group by the British Federation of Business and Professional Women's **Clubs** (hereafter 'the Federation'), which was formed in 1933. The Federation was characteristic of many organisations for women at that time. It was run along highly bureaucratic and formal lines, in part because of the belief that women needed to be trained in formal meeting skills in order to be able to participate fully in society and its political apparatuses now they had the vote. The Federation

was the umbrella organisation for women's clubs and, although the clubs – more akin to City men's clubs than Working Men's Clubs – were predominantly social and cultural spaces for a certain class of women to meet in, they contained within their membership prominent women in the professions and business.

The standing items on the Federation meeting agendas for the period 1933-1935 show an organisation keen to exploit the access to women and opportunities abroad through the link to the International Federation in Geneva. The opportunities were not primarily commercial in the sense of opening up markets for women entrepreneurs – the activities of the 'Commercial Exchange' sub-committee being largely confined to compiling a list of shops and offices owned by members "so that members visiting other countries could patronise their colleagues' [businesses]..."¹³ Indeed, it was the 'Fine Arts' sub-committee that was far more active in this period. Its aim was "to assist members in making contact with artists in other countries and to keep them informed of opportunities for making their work known." How this organisation became 'radicalised' to the extent that it transformed into a national and international women's employment rights lobbyist is the focus of the next section of the paper.

The first Annual General Meeting of the Federation was held at Craig's Court Restaurant, in London, on Monday April 23rd 1934. Miss Sangster, who was chairing the meeting in her capacity as President, was in reflective mood that evening and in her speech to the assembled committee members, she had much to say about women, globalisation and the power of organising. There was no doubt in her mind that the Federation – and the International body to which it was affiliated – were not just needed as a way of providing a forum for business and professional women but as a

means of internationalising women of all nations. Although before the First World War she had been a “violent nationalist” that conflict had revealed to her how important it was for women to work across national borders to build understanding.¹⁴

The belief in, and promotion of, international women’s co-operation remained central to the activities of the Federation throughout its history. And this is no real surprise given the impetus behind the formation of the Federation in the UK. The International Federation of Business and Professional Women was formed in 1930 as a result of the efforts of the American Federation – an organisation that could trace its own history back to 1919. In the 1930s the International Federation was headed by the charismatic Dr Lena Madesin Phillips, who promoted the benefits of affiliation to the parent organisation with great zeal and in 1933 the UK formed its own Federation and duly affiliated to the International body. Although the Federation was free to create its own constitution and fight its own campaigns, affiliation to the International organisation brought it with it the necessity to conform to its rules and by-laws. One particular by-law of the International Federation was to be a long-running thorn in the Federation’s side. And, in the minutes of the AGM of 1934, we can see the genesis of the clubs issue. .

A question was raised as to whether:

“professional and Trade Associations of women were eligible for membership, whether the word [‘club’] was interpreted in its very wide American sense or in the narrower English sense”¹⁵

The question was a highly political one in the context of the meeting, for the British Federation of Business and Professional Women's *Clubs* consisted at that time of what can be thought of as two broad categories of groups. The first were social clubs that represented women in particular trades, industry or professional sectors (e.g. Women's Advertising Club). The second type was modelled on male Rotary Clubs where women of all professions could meet socially (e.g. The Alpha Club or the Provisional Club). Whilst it might – from a contemporary perspective - be expected that clarification was sought as to whether *social* clubs should be admitted, it was the inclusion of professional and trade organisations that caused disquiet in 1934 and a motion was passed to clarify with matter with the International Federation.¹⁶

By September 1934 the Federation had received its answer and in response the Executive suggested that the ruling required that “the whole basis of the British Federation would have to be reconsidered at a future meeting¹⁷”. This crucial meeting (the correspondence reveals it to be an extremely lively and contentious one) took place in January of 1935.

Caroline Haslett, as Chair of the Executive Council of the Federation, chaired the overall meeting and announced to the assembled members that:

“The International Board held that any organisation composed of at least 75% of Business and Professional Women was eligible for membership in the Federation, and the Council of the British Federation had therefore thought it wise to call this meeting to confer with other organisations as to the wisdom

and utility of so altering the constitution of the British Federation as to admit such organisations.....”¹⁸

The suggestion that they might consider “the wisdom and utility of so altering the constitution” hardly conveyed the significance of the decision about to be taken. What in fact this motion provided was an opportunity to debate the need for an organisation that would have much wider aspirations than furthering women’s friendship, talents or understanding. It was a motion that provoked a long debate about the need for an organisation that would “facilitate the circulation of information ... prevent overlapping and to provide machinery through which these bodies could voice their common views and take common action where necessary”. This was, from the outset, a change that would create an organisation *designed* to speak out on issues that women felt strongly about in the political, social and economic arena.

The politicisation of the Federation was clearly a difficult issue for many connected to the organisation in its original conception. Hitherto the subject of politics, and of collective action, had been deflected whenever it had been raised at meetings. For example, at the AGM of 1934 there were two attempts to include contemporary political issues as part of the business of the evening. A member asked if it were within the competence of the meeting to pass a Resolution “in connection with matters affecting the interests of seamen” but this was quickly ruled out by the President as being outwith the scope of the Federation. The second was not so easily sidelined. Miss McMillan proposed that a resolution should be passed protesting against the government proposal to ban women from working in the mines. Although supported by other members it was eventually decided that:

“it was undesirable for any meeting to pass resolutions expressing definite opinions without any information or study of the subject involved. It was suggested that study circles which could take up matters like those already raised might be formed next Autumn and that those circles could then report and recommend action to their various clubs and through the clubs the Federation, so that any Resolution sent forward should really have the support of the membership behind it.”¹⁹

This mechanism for ensuring support for resolutions that took a political position on women's employment and rights removed all possibility of the Federation behaving as an activist or lobbying organisation. But there had always been resistance within the Federation to being seen as politically active – especially in speaking out in support of women's issues – and the Federation's constitution had a by-law enshrining the principles of being non-sectarian and non-political. But in debating whether this by-law was enough of a safeguard against political action it was acknowledged, “any action taken in support of women's work generally would almost inevitably be regarded as both partisan and contentious”.

The removal of the ability to speak out politically on women's issues clearly rankled with a number of members. Throughout the short life of the Federation of Clubs the political versus non-political status was a visible fault line running through the organisation. For example, in 1933 the Women's Advertising Club submitted correspondence advertising a meeting on “The Married Woman's Right to Earn”, and again in January 1934 they asked the Executive Council for a financial contribution

from the Federation in support of a public meeting demanding equal pay for equal work²⁰. Whilst there was (cautious) acceptance that the general principle of equal pay seemed equitable there was no question of a financial contribution being made. And it is difficult not to hear the note of smug satisfaction in the minutes of the next meeting when it was recorded that:

“A report on the mass meetings for equal pay for married women had been received, together with accounts which showed a considerable loss, so that the Federation’s actions in refusing to be identified in these efforts was felt to have been proved extremely wise.”²¹

But the push for an organisation that could represent the interests of professional and businesswomen and lobby for change could not be resisted for long. The resolution to set up the British Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Organisations was carried at the meeting in 1935: 18 in favour, three abstentions and none against. It appears – that despite the final result of the vote – that the debate was a lively one and feelings ran high. Yet the sticking point was not the use of the Federation for political purposes but in the status of the social clubs in the new Federation. If the Federation was to provide a link for professional and businesswomen to work together through their industry or professional bodies, then what was to become of the clubs formed for more social ends? The issue was fudged somewhat at the actual meeting – with Caroline Haslett declaring that the idea of professional and businesswomen working together was too important to founder on a relatively minor point – and the vote was won. But subsequent to the meeting three ‘clubs’, which could not meet the 75% rule were not permitted to affiliate with the new Federation.

Almost immediately upon formation the 'new' British Federation of Business and Professional Women threw themselves into a more politically oriented agenda. The minutes of the first meeting in April 1935 noted under "Outline of Work to be Undertaken" that the Federation had already written to the International Labour Organisation asking them to receive a deputation on the action of Britain in excluding women from mine working, even when they were employed in a technical or professional capacity. They also agreed to ally themselves to the question of young persons unemployment, noted that a woman MP was taking some action on the topic in Parliament and empowered one of their council members to "take any steps she felt desirable" in the matter. The Federation also took a strong interest in the "Status of Women" committee at the United Nations, noting that present information on the comparative status of women in each country was insufficient and that a survey would need to be taken.

But the minutes also reveal the extent to which the BFBPW recognised that it was out of step politically with the International Federation in Geneva. The council observed, "... the Equal Rights International was not in favour at Geneva as it is too feministic in its outlook²²". It was agreed that the way around looking 'too feministic' was to provide empirical evidence of loss of ground and reduction in status and that a survey for this purpose should be undertaken.

So, at the end of 1935, a new lobbying organisation had emerged from the tradition of social clubs for women. A self-consciously and actively political organisation, the BFBPW, with only a small number of women acting as the Executive Committee (the

elite cadre that Doughan²³ speaks of, prepared to do the thankless, nit-picking tasks) set about tackling the pressing issues of the day – the education of women for civic service, support for women in the international arena, the gathering of research on the comparative status of women and lobbying for training and education opportunities for women.

Central to their domestic campaigning was the relationship that the BFBPW had with women MPs across all political parties, and especially their links to those Conservative women MPs interested in advancing women's status. The political links were important in several senses; they allowed the BFBPW to feel that they were making progress by campaigning within the existing political systems rather than stepping outside of them, they provided advice on how to manoeuvre within the system and holding honorary office in the BFBPW. But in an age where the civil service was small and where governments did not have specialist units or ministries dedicated to 'women's issues', the BFBPW also acted as members of a feminist policy network that was under-developed within the state apparatus. In this way, I argue, they were acting as an emergent form of 'femocrat'. Femocracy is a term used in Canada, New Zealand, Netherlands, Nordic countries and Latin America to describe a highly visible group of women, openly committed to feminism and the advance of the status of women in society, most often working in senior public servant roles.²⁴ Although not in common usage in the United States or Britain, the term nonetheless describes partly the role that the BFBPW, and other similar feminist organisations, played from the late 1930s onwards.

The BFBPW was a political organisation – and a feminist one – but it used traditional constitutional and bureaucratic means to achieve its objectives. Its income was derived from fees paid to it by the affiliated organisations as well as advertising in the quarterly newsletter, *Women at Work* (although this never really aspired to do more than break even). It had committees and sub-committees, rules and guidelines, regular minuted meetings, office holders and bank accounts. It was an organisation, above all, that mobilised itself through letter writing and meetings, making contacts with women and men who they identified as potentially helpful and then exploiting those links. Above all, it knew and was comfortable in, the context it worked in – it knew how to avoid looking ‘too feministic’ and it knew what it wanted to achieve. In this sense the women who were instrumental in the BFBPW in the 1930s *were* the sort of feminists that Rowbotham is so dismissive of:

“The feminists, like the Labour men and women, were let into parliament and put on committees. Once inside the constitution, they forgot that they had sought admission because they believed the world should be made anew.”²⁵

But it is unfair to accuse them of forgetting that their project was transformation of the power structures because for many women confining their activities to isolated goals and pursuing equality within the existing legal and economic structures²⁶ was a legitimate form of feminism. Nor was it necessarily an easier path to take as a feminist. When war broke out the BFBPW would find out just how difficult it was to make inroads into the political policymaking. The next section documents how the war years helped define the way that the organisation campaigned for change in the next two decades.

Organisational Maturity: 1940-1953

The question of the impact of the Second World War on women and the gendered social order is, as Caine points out, remains the subject of debate and discussion²⁷ Whereas once the war was seen as delivering new freedoms and independence through their participation in paid work she contends that the experience did not provide a basis for transforming the gender order or social and familial expectations of women.²⁸ However, for some women's organisations the war offered both opportunities and the possibility of an enhanced role in policy making.²⁹

“The war increased their collective sense of worth, even though the government showed little interest in making use of their skills, in contrast to the way in which it briskly exploited untrained and unpaid women.”³⁰

The UK wartime administration gave no sign of utilising professional and business women in the organisation of the war effort in the same way that the Soviets had³¹. But the cross-party co-operation during wartime did allow women MPs across the political divide to help women's organisations gain (limited) access to policymaking and to raise issues within the political system. For example in 1940, when it became clear that women were not being employed in areas where there were known labour shortages, the BFBPW approached several women MPs. As a direct result of discussions between Nancy Astor, Liberal MP, and Caroline Haslett, President of the BFBPW, the Women Power Committee was formed to protect the interests of British women during the war. The BFBPW also became involved in the issue of unequal compensation payments for (civilian) men and women who were unable to work as a

result of injuries sustained in the war through the Equal Compensation Campaign Committee. The scheme, which offered lower compensation to women, was opposed by many women's organisations but the successful campaign to have the legislation overturned was jointly co-ordinated by the National Association of Women Civil Servants³² and the BFBPW.

The BFBPW was at its most visibly femocratic – forming key coalitions with MPs - during the pos-war equal pay campaign. In 1943, after the campaign of the Equal Compensation Campaign Committee had achieved its aims, Caroline Haslett had suggested that the groups involved in that campaign form a similar pressure group working for equal pay³³ and the Equal Pay Campaign Committee (hereafter EPCC) was formed and chaired by Mavis Tate, Conservative MP. During this period – and in direct contrast to the policy of the earlier incarnation of the Federation – the BFBPW also offered financial support to campaigns of other pro-feminist organisations. For example, the BFBPW gave funds in support of the production of Jill Craigie's film on equal pay, "To be a Woman" and promoted its screening in London.

Although the BFBPW was ostensibly non-party political there is little doubt that it enjoyed its closest ties with women MPs in the Conservative party, both when they were in government and opposition. Ellen Wilkinson and Jennie Adamson, two Labour MPs with close ties to the union movement, had protested against suggestions made by the Women Power Committee on the grounds that they were the recommendations of upper-class women with little knowledge of the lives of the working class. And the Trades Union Congress only permitted women trade union representatives to join the committee on the understanding that its remit did not

include the industrial sphere.³⁴ This reflected the relative neglect of women's issues by Labour throughout the 1950s as they failed to adapt to transformations taking place with regard to gender relations.³⁵ It was the Conservative Party, eager to end their years in opposition after the war, which was more alert to the need to attract the votes of employed women. In 1950, Morgan Phillips, the Labour party secretary, was dismissive of the possibility of a Conservative threat to the Labour vote among women. Labour believed that the party of welfare was the party of women and there was little to be gained by developing policies aimed at working women.³⁶

But even Conservative women MPs who supported the equal pay campaign faced opposition from within the party at branch and parliamentary level. Despite entrenched Tory attitudes the EPCC was chaired throughout its existence by former Conservative women MPs (originally Mavis Tate; after 1947 by Thelma Cazalet-Keir) and it worked closely with the post-war female MPs, especially Irene Ward. But, despite a close working relationship with women MPs, pursuing change through traditional constitutional methods involved the drudgery of letter-writing, often in pursuit of very small gains. The correspondence of the BFBPW from 1953 gives some indication of their methods. Just before the budget speech of that year they commenced a letter-writing campaign to women MPs urging them to raise the matter in debate. They received the following replies:

From Eirene White the Labour MP:

“You will, by now, have realised that the Chancellor has no intention in this financial year of doing anything about equal pay. There was no reference to it in his budget speech”³⁷.

The MP, did however, assure the Federation of her continuing commitment to forwarding the movement. Irene Ward was hardly more encouraging in her assessment of the chances of the matter being raised – or whether it should be.

“I cannot say whether I can raise the matter of Equal Pay on the Budget Debate or not as it entirely depends whether one catches the Speaker’s eye and I cannot say whether I feel at the moment that any good purpose would be served by doing so.”³⁸

But Ward was an experienced parliamentarian and was ready with some further advice as to how the issue could, nonetheless, be kept on the agenda.

“If the worst happens and no move at all is made in the Budget I think that it will be much more appropriate to organise a deputation with all the principal bodies interested to make representations to the Chancellor, The Minister of Education and the Minister of Labour and The Minister of Local Government and Planning, and that you should ask MPs from all parties in the house to lead the deputation.”³⁹

And in the closing paragraph of the letter she pointed out a small victory that *may* be possible to win. It had come to her notice that women legal staff – who would be paid

at equal rates to men in private practice – were being paid at a lower rate when they were employed by the Civil Service. The BFBPW accepted the suggestion and followed the lead by writing to contacts within the National Association of Women Civil Servants requesting information. A formal protest letter was duly sent to the Bar Council deploring this practice and asking them to take action⁴⁰. As for the idea, duly circulated to member organisations and to the EPCC, that there should be a delegation to ministers to include cross-party representation of MPs ... the somewhat weary response came back from the EPCC that:

“The majority of the committee felt that no useful purpose would be served by approaching ministers other than the Chancellor, and, it was also pointed out that the Campaign Committee had, only last year, taken a deputation to the Minister of Education, whose reply was that the responsibility lay with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I, myself, think that a deputation led by MPs should be more useful than those taken by the Campaign Committee alone.”⁴¹

The BFBPW's on behalf of women barristers in the Civil Service affected 24 women. The equal pay campaign impacted on considerably more, of course, but the methods were largely the same – endless letter-writing, awareness of the timing of parliamentary debates, patient lobbying, following up possible avenues for progressing the cause – even if it was to gain an advantage for just a few women.

By the early 1950s the Federation was still growing - albeit at a hardly stellar rate but in 1951 it represented some 90,000 women in Britain, up from 68,000 women in 1941. It had evolved into a three-pronged lobbying organisation; domestically it

continued to lobby in its own right and on behalf of its own member organisations such as the National Association for Women Civil Servants, it also joined with other women's groups to fight for specific government policies and was also active, via the International Federation, in the work of the United Nations and, especially, the International Labour Organisation.

The International Federation had consultative status to the Social and Economic Council of the UN, its committees and specialised agencies. This meant that the International Federation sent representatives or observers and made submissions to such commissions as the International Labour Organisation, UNESCO, the IMF and World Health Organisation. In 1952, by no means an untypical year of international campaigning, the BFBPW submitted statements on educational opportunities for women, the political rights and education of women, took part in the Liaison Committee of Women's International Organizations and worked on projects for the Commission on the Status of Women. Whilst interested in the work of all these committees (the International Federation had quite definite views, for instance, on the drafting of the Declaration of Human Rights) some issues were more directly relevant to the domestic agenda of the British BFBPW – mostly those dealt with under the auspices of the Commission on the Status of Women. This body dealt with policy and research on issues such as the vocational and technical education of women, where even in relatively advanced nations there was little provision for women to enter the skilled trades. And to illustrate how contemporary sounding their agenda sounds fifty years later they discussed whether part-time work for women was, in reality, a form of unemployment, the difficulties of balancing child care responsibilities with work and also the special problems that faced older women workers. The equal pay issue

internationally was the concern of the Status of Women Commission and in June 1951 that the International Labour Conference adopted a convention concerning equal pay for work of equal value.

If the politics and approach to activism of the BFBPW had changed in the years since 1935, it wasn't necessarily the case that the International Federation they were affiliated to had changed its hostility to anything that looked 'too feministic'. When Bergliot Lie, representing the International Federation, spoke to an ILO advisory committee on employment matters she felt she had to defend the existence of a separate women's organisation in the field. Lie agreed that most problems in employment were of a 'general character', which were of concern to men and women salaried and professional employees. She added that the International Federation "have no wish to deal with the so-called women's problems only". However, in addition to general questions affecting both sexes, Lie pointed out that there were *additional* problems that affected women professional workers. These issues that comprised social conditions, maternity, working conditions, protection, employment conditions and economic position of women as a whole would be forgotten if women themselves did not point them out and seek to improve their situation. It was for *this* reason – and not of ones of feminism per se - that women's organisations and special committees existed⁴².

The war years, which highlighted many visible gender equity issues in employment, not only energised the campaigning of the BFBPW but forged a particular way of working in policy networks that served them well for a decade. They became femocrats at a time when the state was looking for ways of responding to women's

changing demands of it. Although the the political parties were marginally better equipped to identify feminist issues it was organisations such as the BFBPW that worked within domestic politics and international forums to raise consciousness, lobby for legislative change and provide research. It was not, however, a sustainable model for activism in the long term and by the end of the 1950s the organisation was on the brink of dissolution.

The Crisis Year: 1959

When Dame Vera Laughton Mathews assumed the Presidency of the BFBPW in 1958 she took charge of an organisation that was in some difficulty. By 1958/59 it was clear that the finances of the Federation – always a cause for concern – were now in dire straits. Even the search for a prominent woman to take on the job of National President had been a long and complex one with many rebuffs and rejections along the way. Several women who had been close to the Federation during its history – some of them the Conservative women MPs who had helped the campaigns of the Federation in the past – had been approached, but none had felt able to help.

Dame Vera's appointment, therefore, was much in the vein of a once-successful corporation looking for a 'trouble-shooter' CEO whose first task on arrival would be to develop a strategy for turning around the organisation. The problems facing the Federation were financial. Their income was derived from the fees that member organisations paid to them and throughout the latter half of the 1950s the affiliated organisations were themselves losing membership, suffering financially and either disbanding or not able to pay their affiliation fees. This resulted in the somewhat bitter observation by one member of the Federation that whilst it had worked hard for

women to achieve higher wages it seemed women were not willing to spare any of this bounty in supporting the organisations that had made it possible⁴³. In addition, the secretarial and other services such as space in which to hold meetings, which often used to be freely provided by member organisations were now having to be purchased, placing further strain upon the finances.

The only solution, Dame Vera concluded, was to merge with the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs. And so it is at this stage of our story that we need to loop back to 1935 and consider what happened to the 'clubs' issue after the decision to centre the new federation around trade and professional organisations. The UK was unusual – even unique – in its affiliation to the International Federation based, as it was, around this idea of an umbrella organisation for representative trade and professional groups. The much more common model in other countries was for women to form clubs in geographical locations and to invite women of all business and professional backgrounds to join. In 1936, after Miss Gordon Holmes had been one of the guest speakers at the International Federation meeting in Paris, Dr Lena Madesin Philips approached her with the suggestion that there was still scope within the UK to run clubs on this model. Gordon Holmes was an enthusiastic convert to the idea and the first clubs were formed in London in 1938 after the International Federation sent over a representative to help set them up.⁴⁴ Caroline Haslett, as Chair of the BFBPW, was involved in the intervening period in discussions as to how the clubs would function, but after the establishment of the clubs there was very little interaction between the two competing organisations until 1946.

At the 1946 meeting of the International Federation the anomalous position of the UK was discussed. The constitution of the International Federation dictated that only one organisation could hold the affiliation for a country, yet the rapid growth of the clubs (and the financial contribution that the UK made to the International Federation) meant that there was some eagerness for a solution to the impasse to be found. A very British compromise was found in the suggestion that a 'Bridge Committee' should be formed between the two UK organisations and that it should be the Bridge Committee, operating under the name of the UNITED Federations of Business and Professional Women of Great Britain that was affiliated to the International Federation.

So it was to Clubs that Dame Vera turned to early in 1959 in order to find a solution to the Federation's problems. She was met with a very definite rebuff. The Annual General Meeting of the Clubs was not until the October of that year and they were not in a position to make a decision at committee level, and they regretted having to say it was unlikely that the clubs would vote in favour if it were possible to delay a decision about the federation to that date⁴⁵. Ironically the Clubs operated the same decision-making mechanism that had thwarted the political activism of the early federation – i.e. the insistence that the separate clubs should be briefed independently, decisions made locally and then discussed at national level to make sure that they were fully supported.

There was a further blow to the Federation in looking for a survival plan with the death of Vera Laughton Mathews in July 1959. The Executive Committee looked again at the options, but with funds so low that they knew they would not be able to

pay the subscription fee to the International Federation the next year, the committee felt that it had no option but to write to all member organisations and supporters to recommend the dissolution of the BFBPW.

The letter acknowledged the number and range of problems that it faced. First there were the structural weaknesses that were opening up: a large number of organisations had left and there had been no new organisations to replace them, which resulted in a loss of income for the BFBPW. Although many member organisations remained sympathetic to national and international lobbying campaigns it was becoming increasingly difficult to fund or support the activities. Then there were the changes in personal commitment; member bodies faced the same problem as the parent organisation – it was difficult to find members willing to serve as officers and committee members.

The Executive Committee did not believe that its work was done – in fact one of the issues for them was that the volume of work at international level that they were involved with was increasing – only that they did not have the bodies or the resources to cope with the demand. With the tone and manner somewhat reminiscent of an abdication speech, the letter concluded:

“The officers and Executive Committee find themselves in agreement with Dame Vera’s views that the financial problems of the British Federation of Business and Professional Women are impossible of solution without the closest co-operation of the clubs, and that dissolution is therefore inevitable.”⁴⁶

The AGM called to discuss the proposals was a fiery one. And it was the British Federation of University Women who shouted the loudest and the longest in protest at the suggestion of dissolution. They argued that the BFBPW represented a true cross-section of working women, that it had no category status, or academic qualification of eligibility, no religious or political bias. They believed that the heterogeneous nature of the federation was its strength and to throw away a link to the UN when the influence of NGOs was on the rise was madness. Finally, they declared that they hoped “that the faint-hearted or defeatist elements will gird up their loins and decide to fight on⁴⁷”.

Loins *were* girded and the motion to dissolve the BFBPW was defeated. The Executive Committee that suggested the motion was removed and an interim ad hoc committee was formed in order to oversee the reorganisation. The ad hoc committee redrafted what in effect became the revised and expanded manifesto for the BFBPW. This new articulation of the aims of the BFBPW provides a snapshot of the development of its agenda and its discourse of equality in the 25 years it had been in existence.

It acknowledged the slow and piecemeal progress on the issue of equal pay and reinforced its belief that training and qualifications were central issues in women’s status:

“...to bring equal pay to fruition everywhere

1. to make equal opportunity a reality

- a. by ensuring that all trainings and all posts are open to women equally with men
- b. by encouraging women to work for the highest standard of qualification and performance in all business and professions”

The BFBPW were also committed to researching the impact of issues on business and professional women. Women in policy networks had long seen this as a priority but had met with resistance within political parties and the labour movement – in 1953 the TUC had turned down a request by the Standing Joint Committee of Working Women’s Organizations to study the social effects of employment on married women. Black and Brooke⁴⁸ argue that this is a problem of recognition – that the Trades Union Congress failed to understand why the research was important given their masculinist perspective and focus on male workers.

“2. to undertake research and propaganda on subjects closely affecting the lives and careers of business and professional women, for example:

- c. housing for single business and professional women, working and retired
- d. retirement age, conditions and benefits.
- e. educational opportunities and treatment of ‘the bulge’
- f. automation and its effect on work inside the home and in business.
- g. The position of married women in employment and national insurance
- h. The re-entry of married women into employment
- i. domestic help for business and professional women.”⁴⁹

The manifesto also stressed the need to interest women in the financial structure of the company, to work towards their admission to the Stock Exchange and other banks and financial organisations. In keeping with the growing interest and awareness of scientific developments in industry the BFBPW also wanted women to be aware of the social and economic impact of modernisation. It remained committed to the links to women members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords and to its role as “a source of information to members of parliament about organised opinion among trained and educated women”. And finally it looked ahead to the corporatist political agenda of the next decade and how to encourage women to take part in the “negotiating machinery” as well as representation at the ILO.

Whatever the chances were of such an ambitious programme being achieved (especially by an organisation that remained in almost permanent financial crisis from this point on) it remains a bold statement of intent and acknowledgement of the difficulties that women faced in the workplace. Although the motion for dissolution was defeated in 1959, the difficulties of resourcing the BFBPW did not disappear. The problems of decreasing membership, lack of volunteers and inability to resource the international workload would eventually lead to the inevitable. The BFBPW limped on financially for another decade before finally dissolving in 1969. The motion noted:

“whilst appreciating that the Federation has achieved many successes and holds a position of prestige, resolves that in view of the growing recognition of women in business and professional life and the changed climate of opinion today, the Federation be dissolved by the end of 1969...”⁵⁰

This time there were no voices urging loins to be girded or for iron resolve to save the federation and in 1971, after all the necessary formalities were completed, it sent its papers and a cheque for £74.14, which represented its final assets, to the Fawcett Society⁵¹.

Conclusion

The history of women's organisations such as the BFBPW poses some challenging questions for contemporary commentators on women and business and for feminist historians. The post-war period is an acknowledged difficult one to deal with within the history of modern feminism with both the militant suffrage campaign before and the Women's Liberation movement after drawing most of our attention away from the feminists of this period⁵². It is, however, a time when many significant campaign issues of the 1920s and 1930s were resolved, even if they did not bring about the full equality that it was hoped they would. But Caine argues that if we 're-discover' the feminism of the post-war period and recognise it as a continuation of the feminism of the suffrage campaign then this ignores the important discontinuities of the 1970s⁵³. The problem is reversed when we consider the significance of organisations such as the BFBPW to women's business networks today where they wish to claim a matrilineal relationship but actually represent discontinuity in terms of structure, methods and objectives.

I think it is important to continue to argue that the BFBPW represents an important line of continuity between the political activism of the suffrage period and feminism of the 21st Century. The *work* of this form of feminism has continued unabated

throughout the decades since the demise of the BFBPW even if the significant changes to our understanding of what feminism is means that it goes largely unrecognised as activism. The tedium of letter-writing has not been alleviated by the advent of email and fax and neither has the nit-picking committee work, consultative working parties or the effort put in to trying to meet with government ministers. The BPBPW Clubs organisation has been through many incarnations but still exists in 2005 as the UK Business and Professional Women Ltd., a federation of regional clubs for business and professional women and still involved in lobbying the Department for Trade and Industry on issues that affect women. Internationally it is also still active through activities such as Project Five-O, which undertakes education projects for young women all round the world in conjunction with the Soroptomists International, International Council of Women, International Federation of University Women and Zonta International.

The way that the BFBPW used links with women MPs in the immediate post-war period suggests that if it is the foremother of any contemporary phenomena, then it is femocracy rather than networking that it gave birth to. As the paper outlined the BFBPW operated within policy networks, working with and through sympathetic women MPs in order to achieve specific social, political and economic advances for women. The BFBPW exploited their London base in order to be close to the centre of political and business life, and mobilised its numerically small, dedicated and well-networked Executive to move easily between government and other feminist activist groups. And through their work with the ILO and the UN the Federation was also operating in international policy networks.

Women working in this way, through femocracy, have never been popular or romantic feminist role models. They are not thought of as ‘proper’ feminists because feminists work in collective, non-hierarchical organizations and not bureaucracies, they are an elite of well-paid managers whose interests are different from those of the majority of women or, finally, they can’t be legitimate agents of the women’s movement because they are not representative of it either demographically or politically.⁵⁴

The history of the women’s movement is not a history of a single mass movement or like that of a political party but is, rather, an account of multiple organisations representing varied (and often conflicting) interests who form loose ties in order to mount campaigns. As Ferree and Hess observe:

“To make claims on behalf of ‘women’ ... is always to abstract from our diversity just enough commonality to sustain a coalition, however temporary, around a particular issue.”⁵⁵

The history of such groups as the BFBPW, however limited some might consider their success in retrospect or how some might wish to see them challenge, rather than try and fit in to, existing power structures is an important feature of the past *and* present women’s movement. Temporary coalitions, relatively short-lived lobbying organisations and even campaign-specific organisations represent the strength and diversity, not a structural weakness, in the history of British women generally and of women involved in the struggle for employment rights specifically.

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- ⁴ Ibid. pp. 17-18
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- ⁶ Sheila Rowbotham (1977) Hidden from History, 3rd edition, (London: Pluto Press)
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- ⁸ Doughan, Lobbying for Liberation, p. 5
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- ¹⁰ Catriona Beaumont, (2000) 'Citizens not feminists: the boundary negotiated between citizenship and feminism by mainstream women's organisations in England, 1928-39', Women's History Review, 9, pp. 411-429
- ¹¹ Gillian Scott (1998) Femininity in the Women's Co-operative Guild, in Eileen Yeo (Ed.) Radical Femininity: Women's self-representation in the Public Sphere, (Manchester: Manchester University Press)
- ¹² Doughan, Lobbying for Liberation, p. 2
- ¹³ WL 6/BF/166 Minutes of the BFBP Women's Clubs
- ¹⁴ Women's Library (hereafter WL) 6/BF/166 Minutes of the Executive Council of the British Federation of Business and Professional (hereafter BFBP) Women's Clubs, 1934
- ¹⁵ WL 6/BF/166 Minutes of the Executive Council of the BFBP Women's Clubs, 1934
- ¹⁶ How much an issue this was for the majority of women who came together under the banner of the Federation is difficult to tell. For instance, Caroline Haslett, the President of the Women's Electrical

Association, was listed on the minutes in the period 1933-35 next to her Provisional Club association rather than her professional group. The criticism made of the British Federation some years later, that they did not consider British women to be “club minded”, does not marry with the picture, in 1935, of *multiple* club membership amongst the representatives.

¹⁷ WL 6/BF/166 Minutes of the Executive Council of the BFBP Women’s Clubs, 1934

¹⁸ WL 6/BF/166 Minutes of the BFBP Women’s Clubs, 1935

¹⁹ WL 6/BF/166 Minutes of the Executive Council of the BFBP Women’s Clubs

²⁰ WL 6/BF/166 Minutes of the BFBP Women’s Clubs

²¹ WL 6/BF/166 Minutes of the BFBP Women’s Clubs

²² WL/6/BF Minutes of the Executive Committee of the BFBPW 1935

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²⁴ Hester Eisenstein (1996) Inside agitators: Australian femocrats and the state, (Philadelphia, Temple University Press)

²⁵ Sheila Rowbotham (1973) Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women’s Oppression and the Fight Against It, (London, Pluto Press), p. 162

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²⁷ Barbara Caine (1997) English Feminism 1780-1980, (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

²⁸ Ibid. p. 227

²⁹ Helen Jones, (2000) Women in British Public Life, 1914-1950, (Harlow: Pearson Education Press) p. 186

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² The National Association of Women Civil Servants were affiliated to the British Federation.

³³ Harold Smith (1981) The problem of “equal pay for equal work” in Great Britain during World War II, The Journal of Modern History, 53, pp. 652-672

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Amy Black and Stephen Brooke (1997) The Labour party, women and the problem of gender, 1951-1966, The Journal of British Studies, 36, pp.419-452

³⁶ Ibid. p. 434

³⁷ WL/6/BF/166 Correspondence Eirene White, MP to Miss G Knight, Hon Secretary, BFBPW, 16th April 1953

³⁸ WL/6/BF/166 Correspondence Irene Ward, MP to Miss G Knight, Hon Secretary, BFBPW, 15th April 1953

³⁹ WL/6/BFB/166 Correspondence Irene Ward, MP to Miss G Knight, Hon Secretary, BFBPW, 15th April 1953

⁴⁰ WL/6/BFB/166 Draft document (undated) included in the file of correspondence between Mary Price, National Association of Women Civil Servants and Miss G Knight, Hon Secretary, BFBPW, April – November 1953

The National Association of Women Civil Servants considered the wording of the original draft a little too strong – requesting that the following paragraph was removed.

“The fact that the services of a qualified woman may be obtained more cheaply than those of a man may have some bearing on the fact that the number of legally qualified women in the Civil Service has almost trebled since 1948...”

⁴¹ WL/6/BFB/166 Correspondence Miss H Hart, General Secretary to the Equal Pay Campaign Committee to Miss G Knight, Hon Secretary, BFBPW, 23rd April 1953

⁴² WL/6/BFB/155 Report of the ILO Advisory Committee on Salaried Employees and Professional Workers, Second Session, Geneva, 18 Feb to 1 March 1952, Agenda papers of the Board meeting of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, New York, June 22-26, 1952.

⁴³ WL/6/BFB/166 Papers of the ‘Ad hoc’ committee, 1959.

⁴⁴ Dorothy Hall, (1963) Making things happen: history of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs, (London : National Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)

⁴⁵ WL/6/BFB/166 Miscellaneous correspondence of the Executive Committee, 1959

⁴⁶ WL/6/BFB/166 Letter to member organisations on behalf of the BFBPW signed by HC Hart (Chairman), J Frith (VC) and H Sutherland (VC), September 1959

⁴⁷ WL/6/BFB/166 Correspondence from British Federation of University Women to Executive Committee of the BFBPW, September 1959

⁴⁸ Black and Brooke, ‘The Labour party, women and the problem of gender, 1951-1966’.

⁴⁹ WL/6/BFB/166 Papers of the 'Ad hoc' committee, 1960.

⁵⁰ WL/6/BFB/164 Minutes of the AGM, 1969

⁵¹ WL/6/BFB/166 Correspondence between Lady Davidson, BFBPW to Miss K Halpin, Fawcett Society (undated)

⁵² Caine, English Feminism 1780-1980, p. 222

⁵³ Ibid, p. 224

⁵⁴ Eisenstein, Inside agitator.

⁵⁵ Myra Ferree and Beth Hess (2001) Controversy and coalition: The new feminist movement across four decades of change, (New York, Routledge) p. viii